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ABSTRACT

To penetrate the growing complexity of theoretical perspectives and research methodologies surrounding organizational behavior, this paper introduces the ABC Matrix. This conceptual framework clarifies complex, repetitive organizational behavior by grouping behaviors (avoidance, buffering, and confronting) into readily understood categories. Second, the matrix stresses the importance of observing behaviors at the individual, the group, and the overall organization levels. Third, the framework helps ascertain trends over time and explain current behaviors. Fourth, the matrix serves as a basis for developing practical tools to diagnose behavior and encourage behavior change when appropriate. While early feedback from graduate seminars and professional development workshops for educators supports the matrix as a useful tool, it has not yet been widely critiqued or field-tested. A survey instrument has been designed to meet this need. This paper's three sections (1) introduce, define, and integrate the ABC concepts; (2) present a case study employing the matrix; and (3) explore the matrix's potential for analytical and diagnostic purposes. The matrix enables organizational leaders to see both extreme behavior types and the blending of these behaviors as they typically occur in reality. Because the matrix is not a "canned" approach, it provides guidance for understanding, while encouraging contingency applications to specific organizational sites. (MLH)

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THE ABCs OF ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR

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THE ABCs OF ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR

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Over the past century much attention had been devoted to the study of behaviors that occur in organizations. In the process, a variety of theoretical perspectives and research methodologies have evolved in order to understand, explain and predict behavior in organizations. One unintended outcome of this effort has been that, as our understandings have expanded, the concepts associated with organizational behavior have become increasingly complex and confounding to the uninitiated. The extent and complexity of the knowledge gained has, in short, made it difficult for most organizational members to comprehend, let alone apply, the meanings that can be derived from the literature on organizational behavior.

The conceptual framework introduced herein is intended to respond to this dilemma. That is, we have attempted to return the discussion to a straightforward, manageable level of comprehension so that concepts related to organizational behavior can be understood and applied to organizational members. The utility of the framework which we propose--the ABC Matrix, can be stated as follows. First, by grouping behaviors in readily understood categories, the matrix helps to clarify complex and repetitive organizational behaviors. Second, it emphasizes the importance of observing behaviors at the levels

of the individual, the group and the over-all organization. Third, it allows us to ascertain trends over time as well as to explain current behaviors. Fourth, it serves as a basis for the development of practical tools for diagnosis of behavior and, subsequently, the encouragement to change behaviors when appropriate.

A word of caution about the matrix is in order because it is still in a formative stage of development. Responses of participants who have explored it in our graduate seminars as well as responses of educational administrators who have discussed it in professional development workshops, indicate that it is readily comprehended and deemed useful as a management tool. However, while this early feedback lends support to our belief that it is a useful contribution to the understanding of organizational behavior, it has not yet stood the test of widespread criticism or of intensive application. Its ultimate utility for diagnosis, intervention, and evaluation will depend upon such critical review and thorough field testing. In this regard we have recently developed a survey instrument which is being field-tested in school settings, both in Israel and the United States. Analysis of survey responses should go far towards providing a better sense of the matrix's utility.

To present and explore the matrix, the paper is organized in three sections. Initially ABC concepts are introduced, defined, elaborated upon and integrated. Second, a case study is presented, utilizing the matrix. Finally, the potential

usefulness of the matrix for analytical and diagnostic purposes are presented.

THE ABC FRAMEWORK

Organizational behavior can be classified within three major categories; avoiding (A), buffering (B) and confronting (C). When these behaviors are observed on three levels--the individual, the group and the organization, a matrix is formed. The resulting matrix is depicted in Exhibit I.

Exhibit I

The ABC Organizational Behavior Matrix

Level of Analysis	Avoidance	Buffering	Confronting
Individual			
Group			
Organization			

The matrix concepts can be defined as follows:

Avoiding: behavior aimed at escaping problem situations by disconnecting or moving away physically and/or mentally as much as possible.

Buffering: Behavior aimed at building a shield between oneself and the problem situation.

Confronting: Behavior aimed at meeting the problem situation at its source with the intent of overcoming it.

The individual: The person encountering the problem situation.

The group: Groups are composed of two or more individuals and can be subdivided into formal and informal groups. Formal groups are purposefully established to meet specific organizational goals (such groups include departments, divisions and committees). Informal groups are formed on the basis of

common interest among individuals (e.g., commuters, bowling teams or social clubs).

The organization: Formalized entities that encompass individuals and groups, they operate under established procedures and rule structures and are purposefully established to meet specific ends.

Before proceeding, it should be noted that matrices have limitations. They foster a misperception of neatness and order. For example, while for purposes of analysis we can focus on any of the three levels and/or on any of the three forms of behavior included in the ABC Matrix, in reality all levels and forms of behavior are likely to be occurring and observable at any given point in time. Likwise, the matrix may give the impression that categories of behavior are clearly distinct from each other, mutually exclusive, discrete and static. Of course, "real life" is not so clearly categorized. The three categories of behavior are conceptually different but in practice the distinctions may be more subtle and will tend to overlap because different individuals, groups, and organizations may interpret the same phenomena differently or their motivations for similar behavior may differ significantly. Counter-balancing such disadvantages is the possibility that the ABC Matrix can focus our attention on patterns of behavior and can impose a modicum of order on what otherwise might appear to be randomness.

How the Matrix Helps Explain Behavioral Alternatives: A Case Example

To illustrate the explanatory powers of the ABC Matrix, we will posit a case situation and explore it within the context of the matrix. Briefly, the dynamics of the situation take place

in the psychology department of a large private university. A downturn in student attendance due to a sharp decline in college-aged population, a shift towards public institutions as tuition costs go up, and a move in enrollment away from the social sciences and toward the natural sciences, has made the faculty of the department aware of the need to make every effort to attract and retain students. One of the more concerned faculty members, Dr. Greenwood, a senior professor, has noticed, to his dismay, that Mrs. White, the department secretary, has been behaving negatively with people who seek information about enrollment in the department's program of studies. Most disturbing, she has been discourteous when talking to prospective students on the phone as well as with those who stop by the office for information. How should he deal with the situation? Dr. Greenwood could respond in a variety of ways. For example;

--He could simply overlook the situation since there have been no formal complaints;

--He could delay taking any action until he observes the situation for a while longer;

--He could share his observations with the department chairperson;

--He could talk with his colleagues;

--He could talk to Mrs. White directly and ask her to change her behaviors.

These are only a few of the possible choices open to him. What he actually opts to do would depend greatly upon such things as his previous experiences with Mrs. White, his

assessment of the situation, his willingness to take risks, and his own needs at the moment.

Similarly, the group (i.e., the department faculty) and the control sector of the organization (i.e., the chairperson's office) have a variety of response options at their disposal. The ABC Matrix can be employed to help us catalog the various responses open to Dr. Greenwood, the group and the organization. The presentation of these options will be organized according to the three behavioral alternatives--avoidance, buffering and confrontation.

Avoidance

When Dr. Greenwood found himself in the problematic situation in which Mrs. White was mistreating potential students, he could have eliminated contact with the problem by simply leaving the office. That is, he could have physically removed himself from the problem situation. Alternatively, if he did not choose this extreme response, he could have avoided the situation by rationalizing that Mrs. White's behaviors are probably no worse than behaviors of office personnel in other departments and that, in the final analysis, if they are seriously interested in the program, potential students would likely ignore her discourteous behaviors and proceed with their applications to the department. Alternatively, Dr. Greenwood could conclude that, although the problem is real, it is not his concern. After all, the department chairperson hired Mrs. White and is her immediate supervisor, so he should deal with her.

In the above examples Dr. Greenwood found himself thinking through avoidance strategy options that range from elimination of contact, to reduction of contact, to shifting of responsibilities. The common denominator of the response options is the intent to avoid, as much as possible, any contact with the problematic situation.

The same sort of avoidance behaviors might also be observed at the group level. In the case, assuming that other faculty members are aware of the situation, as an informal group--i.e., as colleagues, they could condone Dr. Greenwood's avoidance behavior by behaving in the same manner. Formally, they could meet and conclude that the situation does not affect the group or, at least that it is not in its power to take the actions that would be necessary to rectify the situation. In short, it could refuse to act as a group, thus leaving the matter to others, such as the department chairperson.

At the organization level represented in the case by the department chairperson and, if he or she chose to involve others, perhaps the faculty or the dean of the school, avoidance behavior might be manifested through refusal to seek further information or even to review the situation. Mrs. White's negative behavior towards prospective students could be viewed as untypical of her normal behavioral patterns and thus not require an organizational response. If avoidance were the preferred response, no attempt would be made by organizational leaders to verify this assumption.

The department could also avoid disciplining Mrs. White by reassessing the situation and modifying expectations. For example, given that the enrollment problem is so pervasive, the department might conclude that recruitment efforts will not significantly affect the problem. Given this reality, why discipline Mrs. White for her behaviors? Assuming that she manages the office efficiently and effectively in other ways, why "rock the boat?"

Buffering

Buffering can be employed for various purposes. It can be used as a means of protecting or shielding; i.e., the situation may still exist if we do nothing about it, but, as a result of our buffering behaviors, we protect ourselves from its pressures. It can also be used as an initial strategy that leads to avoiding or confronting behaviors. That is, it can be used as a prelude to the development of means of escape or to the development of strategies for confrontation.

There are four forms of buffering that individuals, groups and organizations can employ: time, people, norms, and space.

Time: Time can be used to separate oneself from a situation. For example, Dr. Greenwood may conclude that little can be done about Mrs. White's behaviors and decide to use time; e.g., "I'm too busy to deal with it," to buffer himself from the situation. It can also be a prelude to avoidance or to confrontation. As a prelude to avoidance, if Mrs. White was eligible for retirement, Dr. Greenwood could conclude that time

will soon run out and, if he waits long enough, he will not have to do anything. However, if Dr. Greenwood believed that confronting the situation was the right thing to do but, for the moment, felt unsure of what to do about Mrs. White's behavior, he could postpone or delay taking any actions (i.e., "buy time") until a coherent strategy of confrontation emerged.

The group could also use time by requesting more information, thus postponing the need to take action. This strategy could be repeatedly applied so that, although the unsatisfactory situation might continue, the group would not have to deal with it. If the intent was to delay with the hopes that Mrs. White would change her behavior or leave the job, or that someone else would deal with the situation, time would be used to find a means of avoidance. Finally, if the intent was to postpone action to allow time to think through ways of dealing with the situation, time would be used to move toward confrontation.

Similarly, the chairperson, as the embodiment of the organization, could wait for more information to accumulate as a means of buffering himself from the situation. He could also use time as a transitory device towards ultimate avoidance of the situation or towards confrontation once things cooled down and/or more clarity was developed.

People: This buffering strategy uses people as a protective shield. On the individual level, asking someone else to deal with the issue is a common use of this strategy. In this case, Dr. Greenwood might ask the department chairperson, or a

colleague who had a reputation for speaking out about unsatisfactory situations, to deal with the problem of Mrs. White's behavior.

At the group level this kind of buffering might occur if the situation is delegated to group representatives such as the unit head, union officers, or even unofficial status leaders, or given to another group (e.g., another department). The basic intent is to put a shield or buffer between the group and the situation. For example, in the case of Mrs. White, the faculty group might ask the chairperson to mediate the situation; suggest that civil service officials or union officers intervene; or even press the personnel department to devise in-service programs to help office personnel improve their interpersonal behaviors and office management skills.

The options to use people as buffers are even greater for organization leaders because they have control of structures and the formal authority that is required to delegate tasks to individuals and groups. Ways that organization leaders use people as buffers include reassigning tasks among individuals and/or groups and forming study groups to examine issues and devise recommendations for action. In the case, Mrs. White could have been transferred or her role could have been changed so she would no longer be responsible for dealing with inquiries by prospective students. Similarly a committee could have been created to examine the issue.

People can also be used as an initial buffering strategy that can subsequently lead to avoidance or confrontation. For

example, if the department decided to appoint a committee to study the problem of Mrs. White's behavior with the intent of developing action recommendations, this would clearly be buffering with a confrontation orientation. However, a committee might also be appointed with the full knowledge that it will not meet or at least will not take its task seriously, thus enabling the department to avoid the situation, at least temporarily. In the present case, perhaps if the department used the people buffering option and procrastinated long enough, Mrs. White might change her behavior or retire.

Norms: Relying on norms, unwritten expectations as well as formal organizational governance procedures and role expectations, is another way of buffering from the direct pressures of a situation. If the norms in the case required that "when clients complain, turn in a report," Dr Greenwood could reason that, since clients had not submitted formal complaints, no further action would be required. The group could also fall back on such behavior by agreeing that it has long been a department norm to allow office personnel wide latitude in their conduct. At the organizational level a web of formal procedures could be designed as buffers. If the prospective students who were mistreated by Mrs. White had to go to the personnel department or had to obtain a special form to be submitted in multiple original copies, the energy costs would probably be more than they would be willing to bear. Similarly, if Dr. Greenwood was inclined to raise the issue, but had to go through formal procedures and was required to meet with

personnel supervisors to report what he had witnessed, he probably would drop the effort.

Space: Using space to distance oneself from a situation is another buffering strategy. For example, top-level managers' offices are not easily accessed. Similarly, personnel can be removed from immediate exposure to each other by long hallways or by separate and distant physical locations. In the case, Dr. Greenwood and his colleagues could buffer themselves from the situation by working at home or at least cloistering themselves behind closed office doors. The department chairperson could do the same or perhaps move Mrs. White to the far end of the office where she would be out of hearing range.

The time, people, norms and space buffering behaviors described can be appropriate if they protect individuals, groups and organizations from everyday pressures and minor problems so that they can concentrate on meeting goals and objectives. However, they can also lead to over-buffered situations; i.e., where contact with everyday reality is lost and eventually one may be in for a rude and possibly catastrophic awakening.

Confronting

Confronting behaviors are those that attempt to meet problems at their source with the intent of overcoming them or at least making them more manageable. Confronting behaviors differ from avoiding and buffering behaviors in that they are oriented towards coping with problems rather than escaping or hiding from them.

Basically there are two modes of confrontation--automatic and planned. Automatic confrontation behaviors occur either because of an overwhelming desire to respond (e.g., when someone pushes ahead in a long line at the market) or as a result of previous training (e.g., responding to a fire in an appropriate manner as a result of practice during fire drills). Planned confrontation behaviors, on the other hand, are based on puposeful, pre-designed strategies. The common denominator of the two confrontational modes is that they are attempts to cope with problems in hopes of overcoming them.

In the case situation, Dr. Greenwood would be responding in an automatic confrontational mode if he reprimanded Mrs. White immediately upon observing her behaviors or told her that he would inform the chairperson about her behaviors if they persisted. If, on the other hand, he had made an appointment with the chairperson to discuss the issue with the intent of resolving it, he would be acting in a planned confrontational mode. The group, in turn, might confront automatically by demanding that Mrs. White change her behavior or, in a planned fashion, by consensus seeking and/or choosing representatives to deal with the situation.

Organizations are also represented by role players who might respond automatically. In the present instance the chairperson might, out of exasperation, scream at Mrs. White or, on the basis of established policy, have a meeting with her as soon as her inappropriate behaviors were noticed. In the planned confrontational mode, organizations can turn to a large arsenal

of options, including invocation of sanctions, application of control systems, delegation of authority, development of alternative communication lines, or modifications in role definitions. In the case, for example, the chairperson could do such things as threaten Mrs. White with a poor performance evaluation, monitor her activities more closely, or shift responsibility for interactions with the public to another staff member.

ANALYTICAL APPLICATIONS OF THE ABC MATRIX

The ABC matrix can be adapted and applied in a variety of ways. Beyond providing a basic classification of behaviors, it can also serve as a departure point for further analyses which can improve our understanding of complex behavior of individuals and groups as well as the unique culture of particular organizations. To exemplify the matrix potential, five analytical applications will be discussed: patterns of behavior; contingency planning; dicrepancy analysis; organizational culture; and normative aspects.

Patterns of Behavior

Most of us do adjust our behavior to different situations, but for the most part our behaviors are patterned. By patterned we mean that we tend towards consistent arrangements of social

actions. Within the ABC matrix context three patterns can be shown graphically as follows:

Exhibit II
Examples of ABC Behavior Patterns

Examples	ABC Configurations		
1	A	B	C
2	A	B	C
3	A	B	C

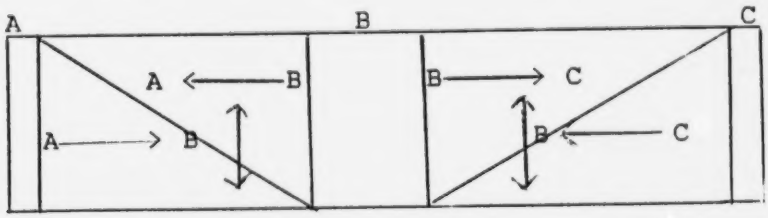
All behavioral types are represented in each example. What differs are their unique configurations. Data can be organized as above for diagnostic purposes; i.e., to understand behavior and, subsequently, to suggest alternative behavior patterns if appropriate. For individuals, better understanding of patterned behavior, reflecting personal characteristics, might be the impetus. On the group level of analysis, issues might surface regarding extreme normative group pressures. Current organizational patterned behavior might be viewed as over-bureaucratized, causing interest in behavioral changes at this level. Such analyses might also clarify situations wherein persons, groups, or the organization may be expected to behave in accordance with a certain pattern, i.e., where specific behavior patterns are defined by given situations.

Contingency Planning

Earlier we emphasized that buffering may be either a pure style, an "ideal" type, or may be employed as a temporary strategy before moving towards avoidance or confrontation. This notion can be extended to the other two behavioral styles. In other words, one can start with a confronting approach, but end up with a buffering situation, and the same is true for avoidance. Graphically, the contingency notion can be shown as follows:

Exhibit III

Using the ABC Matrix for Contingency Planning



Using this dynamic frame to analyze the distribution of the various behaviors, the following characteristics can be summarized:

1. Area size that indicates buffering will probably be the dominant behavioral pattern, changing behaviors towards and away from the buffer mode will be very common, and ideal types of behavior are likely to be least common;

2. The horizontal vector is dynamic, with much behavioral movement likely occuring; and

3. The vertical vector emphasizes the combined aspects of behavior, when behavior might on the surface look similar, but is likely to be derived from different orientations.

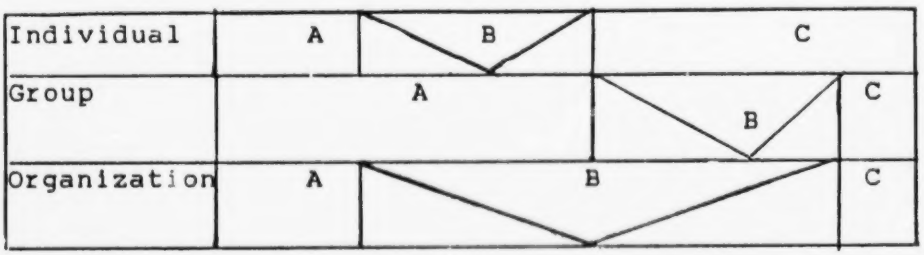
Contingency planning uses of the matrix emphasize the need to view organizational behavior in a broad time perspective because intentions might change, either deliberately or as a result of experience. For instance, a committee may be appointed to clarify and confront a problem, but may become a buffering device over time by choice or as a result of negative experiences, and thus never really cope with the problem. Similarly, different individuals may perceive and interpret similar actions differently, maybe even in opposing ways. Contingency applications of the matrix could be helpful in clarifying these differences.

Discrepancy Analysis

When different behavioral styles dealing with the same problem are observed on different levels in the same organization, we have a discrepancy situation. These discrepancies can be the result of actual behavioral differences or a function of different perceptions of the same behavior. Put differently, if people view the groups or organizational behavioral preferences as different from their own, a discrepancy situation is taking place. This can be graphically presented as follows:

Exhibit IV

The ABC Matrix as Discrepancy Analysis
(one example)



Using the above example of discrepancies as it relates to the case presented earlier, Dr. Greenwood might have preferred a confronting mode in coping with Ms. White. The group might have preferred an avoidance pattern, not admitting that it is a problem at all, or at least not its problem. The organization might not have been willing to get involved, but realizing that a problem exists, might be engaged in a buffering pattern by, for instance, calling in a work-psychology expert--i.e., using a people/time buffering device. In this configuration, Dr. Greenwood would perceive himself as being caught in a cross-fire between the organization and the group while trying to fulfill his job as he sees it. Since Dr. Greenwood tried to confront the problem, he might perceive the appearance of an expert sent by the organization as a sign that the organization was getting deeper into the problem in order to solve it once and for all, although the organization's intention was only to buffer the situation.

The situation might of couse be reversed, with the organization developing a confronting pattern and the individual, either because of his own personality or because of role interpretation, trying to buffer himself from the problem. Also, complementary behaviors manifested at two levels may have an alternative behavioral impact at a third level, e.g., when an individual and a department tend towards confronting, this may enable the overall organization to avoid or to buffer.

Organizational Culture

Organizations tend, over time, to develop consistent procedures of dealing with problems (e.g., to become more bureaucratized) or at least to prefer certain types of reactions to problems. As they do, organizational cultures emerge.

Employing the ABC matrix for this type of analysis might lead to the description of many types of cultures. However, at least four basic types can be observed. The first type is the defending culture which is basically characterized by denial and avoidance in dealing with problems. The second is the postponement culture in which the general approach is to use all means to delay any confrontations while recognizing the existence of problems and the need to deal with them eventually. The third can be viewed as the aggressive culture, in which the organization tends to develop an overall preference for vigorously attacking all problems without discriminating among them, rather than prioritizing and selecting carefully.

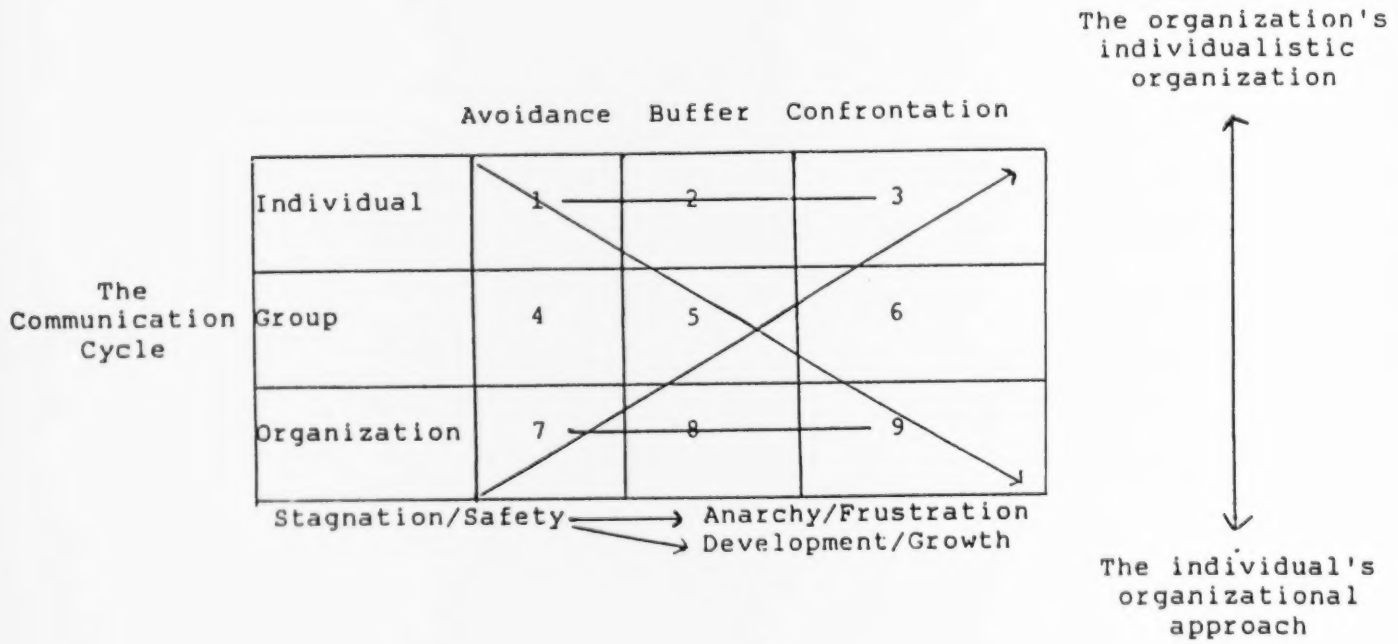
The fourth type, which is the most complicated, is a conflicting culture in which individuals, groups and the organization are each consistent, but there are discrepanies across levels in preferred behavior and these discrepancies exist over time. When different kinds of behaviors are exhibited at different levels, there will probably be problematic encounters because norms are in conflict. A profile of a conflict situation can thus be derived from examining incongruence of behavioral norms across levels. In time there will probably be maladaptations in cultures; e.g., alienation among workers and development of over-controlled internal structures.

Normative Aspects

At the present stage of development the matrix is intended to be used as an analytical tool, not as a normative frame to derive prescriptions for behavior. In fact, the matrix is conceived as value-free and does not imply "best" or most "positive" behaviors. However, it also has potential to be utilized in a normative manner. This would require simultaneous comprehension of all nine cells in a dynamic manner.

Exhibit V

The Growing Approach



An example would be advocating a change on the individual level by moving from 1 to 3 (avoidance to confrontation). This assumes increasing the individual's ability to cope with stressful problems. It might, on the other hand, only be moving the individual from convenient safety to frustration if the behavior is not supported by the group or is not part of the organization's preferential mode of behavior.

Similarly, it might appear preferable to change the organization by strengthening its capabilities to handle complicated situations, which can be perceived as moving from 7 to 9. It might also result in abandoning a safe maintenance

situation and developing into an irresponsible anarchy. This could happen if the organizational change is not followed by changes in group and individual preferences of behaviors.

Hence, we suggest a twofold, simultaneous orientation. The organization could develop an individualistic orientation, while the individual develops an organizational orientation, as can be seen by the diagonal arrows on the above graphic presentation. This means that the organization moves from its avoidance pattern to the individual's confrontational pattern. It also implies the change from a maintenance orientation (which, kept as is, might lead to stagnation in the long run) to the development of support systems to enable individuals and groups to engage in confrontation of problems when needed.

As Exhibit V indicates the individual can also move from his relatively safe corner of avoidance behavior to a confronting orientation on the organizational level. This means the development of consciousness of the organization's characteristics and goals, thus encouraging growth and development rather than anarchy.

Systemwide, one of the basic conditions for employing such a dynamic orientation in an organization is an open communicational system where goals, structures and procedures are discussed on and between levels.

SUMMARY

In our rapidly changing world, organizations must find means of coping with problems if they hope to survive. As a result, we are

seeing an expanding interest on the part of organizations to help their members respond effectively to changing conditions.

The ABC Matrix is an analytical tool that can be used by organizations to help them meet this challenge. The utility of the matrix lies in its potential for explaining a great variety of organizational behaviors within a single conceptual structure that is straightforward and easily understood. The matrix enables one to see both the extreme types of behavior that may be observed and the blending of these behaviors as they more typically occur in reality. It has the potential to help us understand the dynamics of organizational behavior and for prescribing change in those behaviors if such is deemed appropriate. In addition, because it is not a "canned" approach to the understanding of organizational behavior, it provides guidance for understanding while encouraging contingency applications to specific organizational sites.